


# Remember My MISTAKES

By Lt. Christopher Alexander



To say our **passes** over the target area  
were **low** would be  
an extreme understatement.

**A** series of events took place during a flight, all of which entirely were preventable, completely avoidable, and eventually resulted in my probationary flight status. A senior officer and close friend also permanently lost his flight status.

The flight demonstrated almost every example of what any CRM course teaches us to guard against. Our breakdown of flight discipline epitomizes everything we teach our students, subordinates, and peers not to do. Here's how *not* to fly like a professional naval aviator.



Composite

I had been an instructor at VF-101, the F-14 Tomcat FRS, for almost two years. I fully was qualified in every phase of instruction and had served as a phase leader for multiple areas of our CNO-directed student syllabus. I was a qualified mission commander, instrument-ground-school (IGS) instructor, and crew resource management (CRM) instructor. I had flown with the VF-2 Bounty Hunters for two combat tours, during which I specifically was chosen to fly almost exclusively with nugget pilots.

My entire aviation background was one of building a reputation as a knowledgeable, competent, and talented radar-intercept officer (RIO).

A couple months before the incident, my operations officer, a very senior lieutenant commander, had approached me and asked if I would be willing to act as the VF-101 officer in charge (OinC) for our squadron's role in upcoming GBU-38, Mk-82, JDAM testing. With only a couple of refresher students remaining at VF-101, and no new students coming in, our squadron was in a unique position to supply Tomcat support to VX-31 and VX-9. We were to help test the new 500-pound JDAM for use by the last two F-14 Tomcat squadrons. As a former JDAM mission-planning, subject-matter expert (SME) for VF-2, and with experience deploying the Mk-84 JDAM variant in combat, I was excited about taking a lead role in the tests.

Fast-forward two months. After successfully completing the developmental testing at NAS Patuxent River, we were on detachment and preparing for the final operational-test flight and weapon launch at NAWS China Lake.

It was a June morning when my operations officer (also my pilot) and I met at the VX-9 ready room and briefed our test flight. The overall brief was conducted by VX-9, with my pilot and I completing our crew brief immediately afterward. During both briefs, the testing points and profiles were covered ad nauseam, with much discussion. We very quickly discussed the possibility of flying a couple bomb-damage-assessment (BDA) passes around the target

area in a left-hand, racetrack pattern, if our range time allowed. No minimum altitude was briefed for the post-test BDA passes.

Walk, start-up, and pretakeoff were uneventful. Even the test itself went almost entirely as planned, with only a couple very minor hiccups. When we finally released the weapon, and I watched it hit the target on my LANTIRN video, I was ecstatic. Not only was I immensely happy at having led VF-101's part in the testing efforts to bring an important weapon to the remaining Tomcat squadrons, but I also was pleased that all the hard work, long hours, detachments, and difficulties of the past two-and-a-half months finally had reached fruition.

With just under five minutes of range time remaining, our area controller cleared us to descend for BDA passes in the vicinity of the target. Normally, not having a radar altimeter in the back seat, I would have selected a repeat of the pilot's HUD on one of my displays. I then could have monitored the above-ground-level (AGL) altitude of the aircraft in any regime of flight below platform (5,000 feet). However, having flown with my pilot on many occasions, including low-altitude training, combined with my elation at the completion of our testing, I did not select the HUD repeat or monitor our AGL altitude other than visually.

After completing a circuit around the range, we descended and commenced an extremely low-altitude flyby of the target. Climbing as we passed the target, we maintained our left-hand, racetrack pattern and began a second very low-altitude flyby of the target. As we approached the target area during the second pass, our area controller said our range time had elapsed. After completing the second pass, we climbed to break altitude and returned to the field. At no time during the two passes did I say anything to my pilot about our altitude.

The debrief was uneventful and focused entirely on the testing points we had covered in the brief. Neither of us mentioned the low passes. Elated at having completed the testing, I just wanted to start my weekend and looked forward to a great month of flying when I returned home.

As it turned out, I almost never flew again.

The following week, I was called into my CO's office, and I could tell at once it was not a celebratory occasion. My skipper was one of the most relaxed and composed COs I had served under, and it was abundantly clear that he was not happy.

After answering questions about the event, I was asked if I knew anything about a video of our flight. I replied that, yes, I had a copy of the video from our flight, which had been filmed by the range video cameras. I hadn't viewed the video, but I soon got to preview it with my CO and XO.

To say our passes over the target area were low would be an extreme understatement. Had our landing gear been down, they might have been called touch-and-goes. The tape was confiscated, and our field-naval-aviator-evaluation boards (FNAEBs) were convened the next day.

Going through the process of an FNAEB is something I vehemently recommend against if you have any means of avoiding it. Accidents happen, and sometimes the process is necessary. But when a FNAEB is convened because of flight violations or aircrew judgment, the board always could have been avoided.

I learned profound lessons throughout the course of the FNAEB. The most surprising lessons I have learned were those that I never had considered.

As professional aviators, it's easy for us to see the obvious mistakes—starting with the brief. While we focused on the test portion of the flight, we allowed ourselves the inexcusable luxury of completely disregarding the indispensably important briefing of every other portion of the flight, including the post-test BDA passes, the flight parameters, and, most notably, altitudes.

Anytime we plan operations at low altitudes, which are defined as anything below 1,500 feet by OPNAVINST 3710, then low-altitude-training rules must be briefed without exception.

Allowing ourselves to focus only on one aspect of our mission, was an egregious error in basic pre-flight

planning and briefing. No matter how cursory or standard, every part of a flight must be covered during the brief in some manner.

During the post-test portion of our flight, someone should have stated our intended and minimum altitudes for the BDA passes. Because altitudes were not covered during our brief, we should have discussed and agreed on them in the cockpit. Crew communication helps to get everyone's head in the game and makes sure each crew member has a complete understanding of the intended flight profile. You can't perform copilot duties if you have no idea what altitudes or airspeeds your pilot should be maintaining.

Third, my failure to monitor the aircraft's AGL altitude resulted in my inability to question or correct my pilot about our flight parameters. This failure was a basic breakdown of my copilot responsibilities, something that we hammer home to our new students and an infraction for which we mercilessly would punish a student. Once the flight was over, we should have debriefed the event thoroughly, to include the post-test BDA passes and altitudes.

As a crew member without flight controls, and without the exact duplication of instrumentation in the back seat, I often must choose to trust or not trust what my pilot is telling me. For example, in the F-14, I have no way of knowing what altitude the pilot has set in his radalt, other than to listen to what he tells me—there is no way to check it in the back seat. This is why the issue of credibility is so important in a multiseat aircraft.

However, this communication is also two-way. I must listen to what my pilot is telling me, make note of it, and question anything that is outside of parameters. If I'm missing an important piece of information, I must be proactive and assertive in getting an answer.

Likewise, my pilot must trust what I am telling him and my ability as a copilot. Whether I remind him of the heading of a vector, monitor his altitude during low-altitude flight, or select the correct target on the LANTIRN, the pilot has to believe I have the ability to do my job and the intelligence to do it well.

By not selecting a repeat of the HUD in the back seat during our flight, I trusted my pilot and his ability. In so doing, I failed in my most basic copilot duties. My


trust in him was not misplaced; rather, I didn't live up to the trust he placed in me. I had turned into a complacent passenger, who only was along for the proverbial ride. I completely forgot about every good CRM principle ever mentioned, even though I have taught the course on several occasions.

Flight discipline is the responsibility of every member of the flight, regardless of rank, age, or experience. In moments when I would have harshly corrected a student, I allowed my pilot a margin of freedom I had no business allowing. I owe it to my pilot, to myself, to the Navy, and to the taxpayers who pay for me to fly that airplane, to remain vigilant, maintain my professionalism as an aviator, and make sure my aircraft is being operated within established standards.

When the FNAEB proceedings were completed, I was debriefed by my commanding officer. I admitted to him that while I am thankful and consider myself fortunate to have been retained in a flight status, I felt like I was suffering from survival guilt, because my pilot's flight status had been revoked.

My CO told me, "Well, yeah, in many ways, I think that's accurate. If you had done your job, what you were supposed to do, you probably would have saved not only your career, but his, too."

For me this was the consummate moment of the entire process. At the end of the day, it comes down to looking out for the other guy. Not only should I have backed him up to make sure we complied with established rules, regulations, and professional flight discipline, but I should have backed him up because we both love to fly, and we both want to do it for as long as possible. At many points before and during the flight, I could have acted with decisiveness, assertion, and professionalism, ensuring not only our safety and that of our aircraft, but of our continued flying careers, as well.

As aviators and members of our nation's military, we are entrusted with a sacred duty. I perhaps never have been as keenly aware of this fact as I am today. I urge you to consider all of this before your next brief, or as you walk to your aircraft. Remember my mistakes, and do whatever is necessary to make sure nothing similar ever happens to you. 

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